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AUTHOR Hagestad, Gunhild O.
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ABSTRACT

Some family transitions have been reshaped by demographic changes in recent years. Changes in mortality patterns have expanded the duration of individual lives and family relationships. The death of a child, once an expectable part of life, is now so rare that it constitutes a major life crisis. Facing the death of one's parents, still a normal part of the human experience, is now a transition faced relatively late in life. Increased life expectancy and new rhythms in the family cycle have also altered the nature of grandparenthood in our society. Marital disruption and remarriage may be more prevalent throughout adulthood in the future. Divorce and remarriage are not only transitions for couples, but also countertransitions for the couple's parents and children. All of these changes may result in greater importance of the mother-daughter link in the creation and maintenance of family cohesion and continuity. In both demographic analyses and in the study of life patterns, researchers need to use family lineages as units of study. Research is needed on combinations of transition patterns and life changes in family units. (NRB)

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Family Transitions in Adulthood:
Some Recent Changes and their Consequences

Gunhild O. Hagestad

The Pennsylvania State University

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This paper outlines some recent changes in family transition patterns which are affecting individuals in the second half of adulthood. Transitions are defined as life changes which are socially recognized, socially structured, and shared by a number of individuals (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1984). This paper focuses on some family transitions which have recently undergone marked change, or which are likely to change in the near future. The emphasis is on demographic changes which have reshaped transitions in the family realm. Four transitions are discussed:

-- The death of children and parents

-- Entry into grandparenthood

-- Marital disruption

-- Remarriage

For each of these transitions, three aspects are explored: prevalence, timing, and sequencing. Prevalence refers to the proportion of given cohorts who experience a given transition. Timing is a question of when in the life span the transition occurs, and sequencing describes the relative position and timing of two or more transitions.

Death of Children and Parents

Recent changes in mortality patterns have not only drastically expanded the duration of individual lives and family relationships; they have also made death more predictable. We can now make reasonable predictions about when deaths in the family are likely

to occur. This means that deaths which are untimely become crises, because they are unexpected. Parents are no longer prepared for the loss of a young child. Uhlenberg (1980) puts the probability of that occurrence at .04 for the late 1970s. In contrast, he estimates that parents with an average family size early in this century had a .62 chance of experiencing the death of at least one child in the early years of life. While the death of a child used to be an expectable part of being a parent, for men as well as women, it is now so rare that it constitutes a major life crisis. Only among aged mothers of sons does it remain a somewhat expectable transition. It has been estimated that among women who bore a son in their early twenties, nearly one-fourth will experience the death of the son (Metropolitan Life, 1977).

Facing the death of one's parents remains a normal part of the human experience, but it is now a transition faced relatively late in life. In the 1910 birth cohort, it is estimated that one in seven children had experienced parental death before the age of 15 (Uhlenberg, 1980). In sharp contrast, Winsborough (1980) estimates that among women born in the 1970s, nearly 90% will have their mothers living at the age of 40, and nearly half of them will have their mothers at the age of 60. Winsborough argues that parental death has become a more distinctly recognized transition, because it now occurs to the members of a cohort over a relatively short period of their life span. As an example, Winsborough points out that for women born in 1920, it took 24 years for the two middle

quartiles of the cohort to go through the transition of parental death. For the 1970 cohort, he expects the corresponding figure to be 15 years. This means that the loss of parents is becoming more of a shared life experience for age peers, which may have implications for social support during the transition. Loss of parent now also comes in a more predictable sequence of transitions. It typically occurs during the empty nest phase, after the period of active day-to-day parenting but before widowhood. It is also, at least for women, likely to occur after the birth of the first grandchild.

Grandparenthood

Two key demographic changes have altered the nature of grandparenthood in our society: increased life expectancy and new rhythms in the family cycle. While we have seen a steady increase in the average number of life years, a smaller proportion of adult life is spent actively involved in parenting. The overall trend has been toward smaller families and decreased distance between first and last-born children (Spanier & Glick, 1980a). These trends in mortality and fertility have produced a new kind of grandparenthood. Three changes in grandparenthood stand out:

1. The transitions into grandparenthood, great-grandparenthood and great-great-grandparenthood have become more prevalent, particularly for women.
2. The transition into grandparent status typically occurs in middle age.

3. Parenthood and grandparenthood have become more distinct--i.e., more clearly sequenced.

It is estimated that three-fourths of people over the age of 65 are grandparents. Shanas (1980) suggests that nearly half of all grandparents will also become great-grandparents. Indeed, a growing number of women may spend a few years when they are both grandmothers and granddaughters! The rapidity of changes in grandparenthood has caught us somewhat off-guard, and popular images of grandparents reflect myths which are out of step with demographic realities. For example, TV's elderly, grey-haired grandma who serves lemonade and worries about "irregularity"--if she exists at all--is not likely to have the young preschool grandchildren shown on the screen. Rather, her grandchildren would be college students, visiting on their term break. The reduction in age at which women finish their childbearing has made it rare to find overlaps between active parenting and grandparental status. The two have become more clearly sequenced in the life course than was the case when women bore children throughout their fertile years and middle-aged women were still occupied with childrearing, even if their oldest children had made them grandparents.

I have found that when I discuss the rise of multi-generational families to general audiences, I inevitably get the comment that this will all change because "as we all know," women now wait until their late thirties to have their first child. The 1970s trend for highly educated women to delay childbearing appears

less pronounced in the 1980s (National Center for Health Statistics, 1982, 1983b). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the trend encompassed a small segment of the birth cohorts involved. In 1981 natality statistics (National Center for Health Statistics, 1983b) we find that about 1.5% of all first-born children had mothers 35 or older. Considerably more were born to mothers aged 15 or under. The other problem with the timing of parenthood argument, of course, is that the timing of grandparenthood reflects parenthood timing in two generations. We know by now that very young mothers tend to have been born early in their own mother's life, but I am not at all sure we know that late mothers were born to old mothers. Our knowledge of how patterns of timing "run in families" and can be observed in several generations is highly limited.

Marital Disruption and Remarriage

Nineteen hundred and seventy-four was the first year that more marriages were terminated through divorce than through death of a spouse (Glick, 1980). Patterns of marital disruption are still in a period of transition. After the dramatic changes in longevity and the stabilization of mortality patterns, there was a period when most marriages were still terminated by death. Because of sex differences in mortality and age differentials between spouses, this made widowhood a predominantly female experience and created an elderly population in which most women were widows--most men were married. Uhlenberg (1980) estimates that the ratio of widows

to widowers among persons over the age of 65 in 1976 was 5.6:1. In 1900, the corresponding figure was 2.2:1. During the last few decades, we have come to see widowhood as a normal, expectable transition in the life course of older women. This is likely to change in the 21st century.

Even though sex ratios will remain strongly imbalanced (it is estimated that the elderly population will have 65 males per 100 females in the year 2000), widowhood will decrease in prevalence during the next few decades. On the other hand, the experience of marital disruption will be more prevalent throughout adulthood, and more a transition experienced by men as well as women. When divorce ends the marriage, two individuals, rather than one, experience the disruption. For the same reason, remarriage is becoming more prevalent, because divorce puts two people in the marriage market.

Nearly half of recent marriage cohorts will divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 1980). Among divorced women, roughly one-third never remarry (Glick, 1980; Spanier & Glick, 1980b). In 1980, 44% of all marriages were remarriages for one or both of the partners, compared to 31% in 1970 (National Center for Health Statistics, 1983a). Of these remarriages, about one-fifth involved remarriage for the bride, first marriage for the groom. These brides had a median age which was higher than that of their husbands. Consequently, in such marriages, there is a decreased possibility that the woman will outlive her husband. Overall,

remarriage is becoming a disproportionately male experience, especially after the age of 40. Remarriage rates for men are three times as high as those for women (Spanier & Furstenberg, 1983). This is in part due to dramatically imbalanced sex ratios (Guttentag & Secord, 1983); in part it reflects cultural norms regarding age differentials between spouses (Presser, 1975; Wilson, 1982).

Divorce and remarriage are not only transitions for couples. These events create countertransitions (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985; Riley & Waring, 1976) in two other generations, namely children and parents (Hagestad, 1982). Children face numerous ripple effects of parental divorce. It has been argued that children of the past, like children today, were faced by the disruption of their parents' marriage, and that the main difference between the past and present is the shift from death to divorce as the cause of marital endings (Ross & Sawhill, 1975). If Uhlenberg's estimates for parental death are correct, recent figures on today's children would indicate that the experience of marital disruption is significantly more prevalent among today's children than it was among cohorts born early in this century. As I mentioned above, Uhlenberg estimates that about 14% of the 1910 cohort experienced the death of a parent before the age of 15. Recent estimates on the prevalence of parental divorce among children under 16 put the figure over one-third (Bane, 1976; Bumpass & Rindfuss, 1979; Furstenberg et al., 1983). These researchers also provide some

dramatic findings on the consequences of parental divorce for children's life course. Two such consequences stand out. First, a large number of children virtually lose contact with one parent, typically the father. Furstenberg and coworkers (1983) found that among children who were between the ages of 11 and 16 in 1981, more than half of those with an "outside father" had not seen the father within the last year, and more than a third had not had any contact within the last five years. Second, divorce is typically a transitional state, followed by remarriage. Thus, parental divorce often leads to a chain of transitions for children (Furstenberg et al., 1983). These authors, like Bumpass (1981) estimate that among children who experience remarriage following divorce, nearly 40% will experience divorce number two. As of now, there is no legal protection of step-relationships which are severed by divorce. We can only wonder how children of remarriage and redivorce will approach the formation and maintenance of interpersonal attachments as they enter their adult years at the end of this century.

Another ripple effect of parental divorce is that children often lose touch with kin, such as grandparents. In their analysis of divorce and grandparenthood, Cherlin and Furstenberg (1983) found that divorce may lead to an intensification of bonds to grandparents on the "custodial" side, but a weakening of ties to the "noncustodial" grandparents. In some research on midlife divorce, in which children are typically young adults and custody is not an issue, my colleague M. Smyer and I (Hagestad, Smyer, &

Stierman, 1984) have found the same trend. Our conclusion is that custody is not the critical factor. Rather, contact between grandparents and grandchildren is often mediated through the middle generation--the parents. Typically, the mother serves as a "kin-keeper," both for her own and her husband's kin. Divorce disrupts such kin-keeping for the paternal side, and the lack of contact between fathers and children further aggravates this problem. Thus, a growing number of paternal grandparents face the loss of active grandparenthood as a ripple effect of their children's divorce.

Grandparents and grandchildren share another set of experiences created by divorce in the connecting generation: the adjustments of facing new spouses, step-relations, and "pseudo-kin." Often, they subsequently go through the severing of such relationships, which required a great deal of effort to establish. To my knowledge, there is no estimate of the prevalence of such experiences in the grandparental generation. Indeed, parents are the forgotten people in divorce research (Hagestad, Smyer, & Stierman, 1984). For example, we do not know how many people change their retirement plans (when to quit, where to live) as a result of children's divorce.

Mothers and Daughters

If I were to venture into predictions of how families might be different as a result of changes discussed above, I would suggest

that during the first few decades of the 21st century there will be a strong "female axis" in more families than has been common in this century. I am not sure that I would use the title of a recent book and label it "the new matriarchy," but I would predict greater importance of the mother-daughter link in the creation and maintenance of family cohesion and continuity. Several factors are likely to produce such trends. First, there is the longer period of joint survival between mother and daughter. Second, there is the increased likelihood that they will spend some period of time when they are both unmarried. Third, we may observe fewer contrasts in the cohort experiences of the two generations than has been the case in the second half of the 20th century.

As an increasing number of mothers and daughters grow old together, a sizable proportion of them will be without spouses due to death of their spouses or divorce. It is reasonable to assume a continuation of the trend observed in the 1970s: that most older men are married; most older women are not. For example, in 1979, 67% of all men over the age of 75 were living with a wife. Only 21% of the women in this age bracket were living with a husband (Uhlenberg & Meyers, 1981). This means that most men have a significant horizontal, intra-generational relationship till the end of their lives--women do not. It therefore seems reasonable to expect that women will be more invested and involved in vertical, intergenerational ties than men.

The first part of the next century may also have generations of mothers and daughters who not only share the experiences of growing old, but whose adult lives have greater similarities in key role experiences than was the case in the latter part of this century. Those of us who were born in the 1940s belong to "transitional cohorts" of women, between cohort groups with strikingly different life experiences. It is not until the 1950 cohorts that we see the emergence of "the new women," who have high levels of education, smaller families, and fairly continuous work histories. These women will be young-old mothers of mid-adult daughters in the first decades of the 21st century.

I would expect that some of the discontinuities in life patterns of mothers and daughters, which we have observed in recent decades, will become less evident. Books like My Mother, My Self and a long list of similar volumes may have reflected a peculiar combination of cohort experiences which were brought together in family generations of mothers and daughters during the 1960s and 70s. These women may have had to contend with "cohort gaps" which will not occur in future family generations.

Towards Studying Families as Units

This paper has given some illustrations of how demographic change has altered families as social contexts in which lives unfold and are shaped. Recent historical changes in mortality and fertility patterns have drastically altered the pulse of family life. Parents and children may now anticipate sharing nearly half

a century of life. For about half that time, the child is also a parent and forms a link in a multi-tiered set of vertical ties which connect several family generations. In my discussion, I have given some examples of how life course patterns in families are interwoven. Family members are fellow life travelers (Plath, 1980) and life decisions and transitions by one may create involuntary and unplanned changes for others. Recent work has presented a strong argument for the need to study transitions in a total life context (Danish et al., 1980). We now need to take the logical next step and recognize the family context as one in which we observe "the bumping and grinding" of lives in interaction (Plath, 1982; Pruchno et al., 1984). We need to study lives over time, not just on an intra-individual level, but on an intra-family level, considering "bundles" of interacting lives (Hagestad, 1981).

In both demographic analyses and in the study of life paths, we need to use family lineages as units--not individuals or households (Hagestad & Dixon, 1981). Much work is needed on combinations of transition patterns and life changes in family units.

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